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Washington, D.C. -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is announcing the pilot phase of a new study to determine the possible health effects of Agent Orange exposure on Vietnam veterans.

Letters are being sent to 500 randomly selected veterans inviting them to participate. Included are 250 veterans who served in Army Chemical Corps units in Vietnam and 250 veterans who served elsewhere during the Vietnam Conflict. VA is conducting the study with a contractor, Klemm Analysis Group.

The study may ultimately include 2,600 veterans, but the pilot phase is needed to test the full study's feasibility.

Since veterans first raised concerns in the late 1970s, knowledge regarding the effects of Agent Orange has grown as studies have been completed and expanded, and newer laboratory methods have been developed and used. Results of these studies have enabled VA to award disability compensation to Vietnam veterans suffering from certain chronic diseases.

The new health study and its pilot phase will use a combination of telephone surveys, medical records reviews, and blood tests to look for excess rates of illness in the two groups, as well as correlations of health status with blood levels of 2,3,7,8-TCDD, an inadvertent toxic byproduct introduced in the Agent Orange manufacturing process.

The feasibility study is expected to take at least a year. If subsequent analysis of response rates, availability of medical records to validate veteran-reported health history, and other study requirements show that the full-scale study is feasible, that may take another three years to complete.

Two earlier VA studies of Army veterans assigned to Chemical Corps units in Vietnam who subsequently died have found a significant excess of deaths from digestive disease, primarily due to liver cirrhosis. Nonsignificant but elevated rates also were observed for deaths due to all cancers combined and for specific cancer sites. An ongoing mortality follow-up study is being conducted by VA.

The Army Chemical Corps Vietnam Veterans Study is an outgrowth of recommendations of the Institute of Medicine (IOM), which under contract with VA has reviewed and evaluated scientific literature, providing periodic reports ranking the likelihood of an association between Agent Orange exposure and various diseases. IOM research recommendations are helping guide VA in charting continued studies.

In recommending the latest study, an IOM committee observed that members of the Army Chemical Corps, like the Air Force Operation Ranch Hand units, were likely to have had more significant exposure than Vietnam veterans in general. The Ranch Hand veterans, whose aerial spraying missions stripped away enemy hiding places and jungle canopy over enemy supply lines, already have been involved in another major study conducted by the Air Force since 1979.

For a randomly selected subgroup of 100 in the feasibility phase, a medical subcontractor will provide clinic appointments around the country or home visits for the necessary serum collection. In addition to comparing prevalence of health outcomes, such as cancer in the Army Chemical Corps unit members and the non-Vietnam group, similar comparisons will be made for birth defects among the children of veterans of

each cohort. Because study participants are randomly selected to achieve a representative sampling, volunteers are not being solicited.